

Hearing :: 3/24/2010 :: Proposed Changes to NASA's Exploration Program: What's Known, What's Not, and What Are The Issues for Congress?

Opening Statement By Chairwoman Gabrielle Giffords

Good afternoon. I want to welcome our witnesses today. Both Mr. Doug Cooke and Mr. A. Thomas Young have long and distinguished careers in aerospace, and we look forward to gleanings from their decades of knowledge on the subject. Mr. Cooke has agreed to give us answers to the many questions that have been raised concerning the President's budget proposal, but it is understood that he is not the architect of this plan.

I have called this hearing today because we have a serious issue to address—the future of America's human space flight program—and we need to get it right.

The clock is ticking. It is now almost two months since the Administration's FY 2011 budget request for NASA was submitted to Congress, and there are still too many unanswered questions surrounding it.

We are here today because the President's budget has been found deficient by this Congress and by the American people. It proposes drastic changes in the future of NASA with tremendous impact on high skill jobs and high tech manufacturing capabilities. It could leave our country with no human exploration program, no human rated spacecraft, and little ability to inspire the youth of America. The budget proposal does all this with few details to support its new direction.

This hearing is but the latest in a series that have been held by the committee on science and technology and this subcommittee. It is our job and responsibility to ensure that American taxpayer dollars are spent wisely. We must be certain that existing programs are worthwhile and well managed, and we must be fully informed of the impacts of the cancellation of programs.

Over the past few months we have held many hearings to address safety concerns for human spaceflight, the competition of international space programs, and the impact of NASA's programs on the skilled aerospace workforce and industrial base. We have also heard from the Government Accountability Office and NASA's Inspector General. And just last month NASA Administrator, General Charlie Bolden testified on the FY2011 budget request.

Unfortunately, the NASA Administrator was unable to satisfy many of the members of this committee. Today we are going to continue to take a closer look at the elements of the proposed plan and try to get additional information—to the extent that such information exists.

We are also going to examine the impacts and consequences that would flow from its adoption—some of those impacts are quite profound and troubling.

Today we're also going to review the status of the current Constellation program, which just passed a significant design milestone, and we will determine whether the intent of Congress expressed in the FY 2010 appropriations act is being met.

This oversight is the purpose of this subcommittee hearing, and we intend to be thorough.

The fact of the matter is that Congress is being asked to support a budget request that proposes cancellation of the Constellation program. Cancellation of a successful program that has been underway for the past five years. Cancellation of a program that has met significant milestones and would keep the United States as the world leader in aerospace. We have been asked to support a budget request that

will leave this country without a government system to access low Earth orbit and beyond.

In cancelling this program, we would write off \$14 billion in taxpayer dollars spent, with no apparent plan to make any significant use of the results of that investment. We would make this country dependent on yet-to-be developed “commercial crew” services of unknown cost and safety, with no government-backup system available; we would very likely be forced to rely on other nations to access low Earth orbit and the International Space Station for the foreseeable future. We would be left without a concrete plan, destination, or timetable for exploration missions beyond LEO. Additionally, this cancellation would negatively impact the nation’s defense industrial base and would eliminate the program that would ease the transition for the Space Shuttle workforce and help retain key human space flight skills and industrial capabilities needed for the future.

In place of good explanations and solid rationales for such sweeping and frankly puzzling changes, we have been given a combination of unpersuasive arguments and “we’re working on the details” responses.

For instance, the commercial crew proposal is lacking all of the basic information that a would-be investor would demand before committing funds to a project. For example:

- What’s the proposed cost to the government to develop these systems?
- How much, if any, of the development cost will be shared by the companies?
- How much will it cost NASA to buy these services?
- What else will NASA have to provide to make—and keep—the companies’ operations viable?
- When can we credibly expect these services to be operationally available and will they meet our expectation of what is safe enough?
- What recourse will NASA have if the companies fail to meet safety standards, cost, schedule and performance.
- Finally, is there any significant non-NASA market for these services; is it a viable one; and is it one we should use scarce tax dollars to promote?

Congress is being asked to invest taxpayer dollars in a commercial crew venture without providing us with a reasonable expectation of success.

As part of my efforts to find out whether there was a solid factual or analytical basis in last year’s Augustine committee report for the Administration’s plan, I directed a series of basic questions to Aerospace Corporation, the organization that was asked to support the Augustine committee in its review.

Aerospace’s responses, which I am entering into the record of today’s hearing, make it clear that such a basis is lacking in many important areas. That is not a criticism of Aerospace—a distinguished organization—but it does call into question the depth of analysis that the Administration’s proposals received before they were sent to Capitol Hill.

In today’s hearing, we will address the outstanding questions in the proposed budget regarding human exploration. We ask for clear, fact-based, answers. The American public deserves no less.

As a final note, I would like to share something I received in the mail recently. I hold in my hands a drawing sent to me by a seven year old boy scout named Noah. It depicts a spaceship landing on a heavenly body with the accompanying caption, written in the bold script of a child, “We Love Space.”

When Noah is grown and considering a career or an area of study, will NASA still be that shining light that inspires the nation? Noah is not alone. This committee has made the science and math education of young people one of its highest priorities. Under the leadership of Chairman Gordon, we will be

reauthorizing the America COMPETES legislation that aims to boost our STEM education and workforce in order to keep America economically competitive.

In hearing after hearing we are informed that one of the biggest components necessary to get young people interested in science and engineering is a source of inspiration. I believe that NASA has been the greatest source of inspiration that this nation, this world, has ever seen, and I aim to keep it that way.

The most troubling aspect of the President's proposal in my view, and I believe in the view of many of my colleagues, is the lack of any real plan for human space exploration - the pinnacle of inspiration.

I expect more from the Administration and frankly more from NASA, an organization filled with some of the most brilliant and analytic minds on the planet, than a vague list of hypothetical destinations. We deserve and demand a comprehensive human exploration plan that details where we will go, when we will go, and how we will get there. Only by first determining the mission can we determine the necessary technologies and development timeline.

It is my firm belief that America should not sit idly by for another 20 years before embarking on an expedition to Mars. I want to see a plan that includes human exploration beyond low Earth orbit by the end of this decade. Nothing in this budget gives any indication that this would occur, and I find that unacceptable. We have the technology. Let's make it happen.

Thank you, and I now yield to Ranking Member Olson.

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